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ABSTRACT

Since 1996, Arizona has been building a comprehensive statewide system of school-to-work opportunities for students from kindergarten through college, supported by a School-to-Work (STW) implementation grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education. After 3 years, a public opinion poll of a 2,200-person random sample drawn from parents, businesses, and educators sought information on these five topics: (1) public awareness of the STW initiative, (2) perceived need for school change; (3) reactions to specific changes embodied by STW; (4) specific attitudes toward STW; and (5) support for the STW initiative. The polling data showed that awareness of STW among educators is up; increasing percentages of parents and educators report being involved in a regional partnership; and there are high levels of support for changes in the public school system, types of learning programs needed, STW implementation, and the changes in school operations that STW signifies. Educators are increasingly viewing STW as a broad-based career exploration and preparation initiative designed to meet the needs of all students. Support for STW is also growing along the lines of public policy, tax-paying readiness, and candidate support. On the other hand, fewer businesses than in the past report being aware of STW or involved in local school efforts, although a majority of businesses polled continue to express high levels of support for STW,. More businesses view STW as a program that is limited in scope, serves only select students, and is likely to fail because of entrenched bureaucracy, and growing numbers of parents and teachers are beginning to share these views. The study concluded that policy-level action is needed to keep STW alive in Arizona. (KC)

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Support for School To Work Remains Strong—Three Year Trends in Public Opinion

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #13 *August 1998*

ED 450 282

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Since 1996, Arizona has been building a comprehensive *statewide system* of school-to-work opportunities for students from kindergarten through college. Supported by a School To Work (STW) implementation grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, the state is nearing the end of its third year of a five-year grant.

The state system—managed under the auspices of the Arizona Department of Commerce, School To Work Division —is made up of county-based partnerships of schools and businesses. For the fiscal year ending September 1998, ten state-funded regional STW partnerships were operational in all counties except for Maricopa. In June 1998, eight new Maricopa-based partnerships were funded as part of the state's developing system.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy coordinates a multifaceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative. A key component of the evaluation is a statewide poll on public awareness and opinions of STW as a concept and vehicle for education reform. Baseline data were established in spring 1996. The poll was replicated in spring 1997. This briefing paper highlights findings from the state's third year of assessing public opinions toward STW.

Polling is conducted by the independent firm of Wright Consulting Services. Polling samples are drawn yearly from three constituent groups: parents, businesses, and educators. Samples are stratified by county and by STW partnership. Additionally, businesses are stratified by size (i.e., number of employees) and educators are stratified by role (i.e., teacher, principal, and superintendent) and type of school (i.e., elementary, junior/middle, high school). All samples are randomly selected.

In 1998, a total of 2,200 Arizonans participated in the polling. Respondents represent 600 parents, 600 businesses, and 1,000 educators including 500 teachers and 500 administrators (i.e., principals and superintendents). All sample sizes yield results that are comparable with the 1996 and 1997 results and are statistically accurate within a 95% level of confidence (with margins of error not exceeding ± 4.5 percentage points).

Arizona's 1997-98 regional partnerships

- ★ Cochise County Consortium of STW
- ★ Coconino County STW Partnership
- ★ Eastern Arizona STW Partnership (Gila, Graham and Greenlee Counties)
- ★ Mohave Workforce Development Partnership
- ★ Northeastern Arizona Native American STW Partnership (Navajo and Hopi reservations)
- ★ Northland STW Opportunities System (Apache and Navajo Counties except on the Navajo and Hopi reservations)
- ★ Pima & Santa Cruz Counties STW Partnership
- ★ Pinal County STW Partnership
- ★ Yavapai County STW Partnership
- ★ Yuma/La Paz STW Partnership

Note: This list does not include seven direct federally funded grantees: one for the City of Phoenix and six which represent Native American tribes: Navajo/Hopi (4), Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui.

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Summary of Results

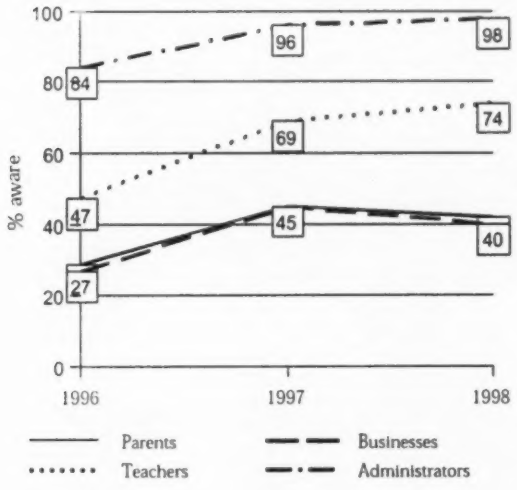
Similar to past reports, results are summarized briefly in relation to five topics:

- ★ Public awareness of the STW initiative
- ★ Perceived need for school change
- ★ Reactions to specific changes embodied by STW
- ★ Specific attitudes toward STW
- ★ Support for the STW initiative

Public Awareness of the STW Initiative

Respondents' awareness of the STW initiative is measured by asking them if they have heard of STW. Figure 1 shows that since the baseline year, overall awareness of STW is up. During the past year, teachers' awareness rose by five points—a statistically significant gain. On the other hand, business awareness dropped by the same margin — also significant. A non-significant increase in awareness occurred among administrators, as well as a non-significant decrease in parents' awareness.

Figure 1
Arizonans' awareness of the STW initiative



Additionally each year, respondents are asked: "To the best of your knowledge, are the public schools *in your area* involved in the STW initiative or not?" Table 1 shows trends in response to this question and reveals that significantly more parents, teachers and administrators in 1998 report local school involvement than in the past.

Table 1
Arizonans' awareness of involvement in a regional partnership

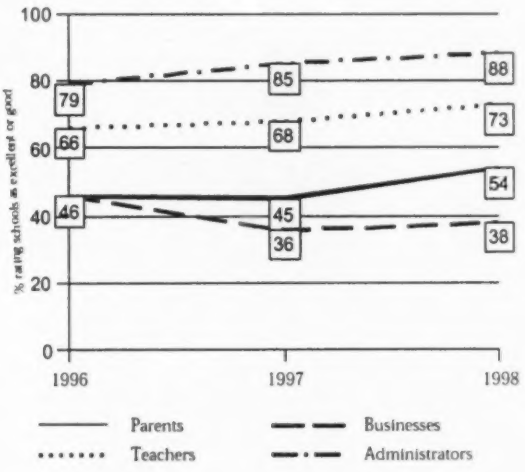
% awareness of regional involvement

	1996	1997	1998
Parents	14%	17%	24%
Businesses	11%	22%	19%
Teachers	20%	40%	48%
Administrators	62%	78%	85%

Perceived Need for School Change

Each year, respondents are asked to rate the overall quality of public school education. Figure 2 shows that all groups rate the quality of education higher in 1998 than they did in 1997; however, businesses' perceptions of quality have declined significantly since 1996.

Figure 2
Arizonans' ratings of the overall quality of public school education



Nevertheless, respondents continue to voice the opinion that schools need to change how they operate. For three consecutive years, more than 90% of all groups say that some degree of change is necessary. Consistently, parents and businesses say that major

changes are needed, while educators indicate that only minor changes are in order.

Asked what kind of changes are needed— specifically in terms of back-to-basics or more comprehensive education including skills such as computer and work skills—respondents consistently prefer a more comprehensive approach to education. A "back-to-basics" approach to education is supported by only 11 percent of businesses, 8 percent of parents, 7 percent of teachers, and 6 percent of administrators.

Reactions to Specific Changes Embodied by STW

As in 1996 and 1997, respondents were informed that implementing STW implies changing the way that Arizona's public schools operate in terms of:

(1) Teachers' duties— to emphasize instruction in teamwork, work habits, and other work-related concerns;

(2) Programs/curriculum design — toward greater collaboration with business and community leaders and parents;

(3) Work-based learning— integrating more work-based learning into the schools to better prepare students for work after leaving the system;

(4) Courses of study— toward offering "Career Majors" for students; and,

(5) Student employment opportunities— creating more opportunities for students while they are still in school.

Polling is designed to determine support for or opposition to each proposed change. For all three years, fully three-quarters or more of *all* constituent groups support the proposed changes. Notably, business support has risen for all five proposed changes since 1996.

Specific Attitudes Toward STW

Probing further into specific attitudes about STW, people are asked to react to pairs of statements about STW in terms of three major ideas: (1) whether it will or won't "work" because of the nature of the education bureaucracy; (2) whether STW provides broad or narrow career exploration and preparation opportunities; and (3) whether it *is* or *is not* for all students, including the college-bound. Results for all three years reveal that a majority of people agree with positive statements and disagree with negative ones. However, this three-year analysis reveals some interesting trends which are shown in Table 2.

Specifically, Table 2 compares baseline (1996) and 1998 data on attitudes toward STW. In Table 2, the symbol ⇔ means that attitudes have not changed significantly over time; ⇑ indicates that significantly more people believe a particular statement to be true than in the past; and ⇓ means that statistically fewer people believe a particular statement to be true.

In interpreting Table 2, "good news" for STW is shown by "up" arrows for positive (+) statements and "down" arrows for negative (-) statements. Conversely, "bad news" trends are exactly the opposite. "Bad news" trends are *outlined* in Table 2; "good news" trends are *shaded*.

Table 2
Arizonans' beliefs about STW: 1996 and 1998

	Parents	Business	Teachers	Admin.
Will work (+)	⇔	⇓	⇓	⇔
Won't work (-)	⇑	⇑	⇔	⇔
Broad prep (+)	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔
Narrow prep (-)	⇔	⇑	⇔	⇔
For all (+)	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔
Not for all (-)	⇔	⇑	⇔	⇔

Table 2 suggests that major inroads have been made in the education community in conveying that STW is not just narrowly focused on certain careers (e.g., technical training) and that it *is* for all students, including the college-bound. Parents, too, are more likely to view STW as designed for all students.

On the other hand, there appears to be greater skepticism among all groups except for administrators about whether

STW can succeed, given perceptions about the education bureaucracy. And, increasing percentages of businesses are viewing STW as both narrowly focused *and* not for all students.

Support for the STW Initiative

Each year, constituent groups are asked whether—overall—they support or oppose the STW initiative. For all three years, results reveal consistently high levels of support for STW implementation among all constituent groups. Significantly, teacher support has risen dramatically by 19% (from 58% in 1996 to 77% In 1998); all other groups are at or above the 80% mark in support of the initiative.

In terms of personally showing support for STW, respondents are asked whether they would be willing to pay additional taxes ($50 per year) to fund STW programs and whether they would vote for or against political candidates running for office who are supportive of STW. For the third consecutive year, clear majorities (greater than or equal to 55%) of all constituent groups indicate a willingness to pay up to $50 a year to help fund STW programs. Between 1997 and 1998, support rose modestly among parents and significantly among teachers. Furthermore, for the third year in a row, well over half of all groups say that they would vote for candidates who support STW. In 1998, significantly more parents, teachers, and school administrators than in the past say they would vote for a candidate for elective office who is a strong supporter of STW.

Conclusions

This year's polling data, and the trends they represent, indicate that there is much good news about STW. It is clear the STW is making headway among constituent groups in many ways: awareness among educators is up; increasing percentages of parents and educators report being involved in a regional partnership; and there are high levels of support for changes in the public school system, types of learning programs needed, STW implementation and the changes in school operations that STW signifies.

A particularly encouraging finding is that attitudes among educators toward STW have changed for the better over time. Educators are increasingly viewing STW as it was intended by law: as a broad-based career exploration and preparation initiative designed to meet the needs of *all* students.

Regarding behavioral support for STW in terms of paying taxes and voting for pro-STW candidates, these data suggest a new level of support for STW— support which may impacts policymaking. Data indicate that a strong impact is possible for candidates who articulate support for STW to their constituents. Particularly in this election year, support for STW could prove to make a difference.

All is not positive, though. In particular, results for businesses tend to suggest that this constituent group warrants some attention in the coming years— particularly in the urban areas of Maricopa and Pima Counties. Although a majority of businesses polled in 1998 continue to express high levels of support for STW and the changes it suggests, fewer businesses than in the past report being aware of STW or involved in local school efforts. Moreover, trend data on business perceptions show that more businesses than in the past view STW as a program which is limited in scope, serves only select students, and is likely to fail because of an entrenched bureaucracy. It is troublesome, too, that the latter view is shared by increasing numbers of parents and teachers.

As Arizona moves into its fourth year of funding, and regional partnerships move into their third year of implementation, the biggest challenge for STW is how to maintain and sustain it. Three years of consistently strong support for STW suggest that it is *worth* maintaining. However, with federal STW funding scheduled to end, and recent federal workforce legislation counteracting the STW Opportunities Act of 1994, the very livelihood of STW is threatened. Perhaps skepticism is warranted about whether this initiative can truly "work." It will take more than concerted efforts at the school level to keep STW alive—it will take action at the policy level.

For additional information about
Arizona's School To Work initiative, contact:

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School To Work is a division of the Arizona Department of Commerce, Office of Workforce Development Policy.

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